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AUTHOR Ledingham, John A.; Masel-Walters, Lynne
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ABSTRACT

Based on a definition of public relations that recognizes the field as a purposeful management function, this paper provides a perspective on public relations to help practitioners develop strategies for the use of new media forms in public relations programs. The paper begins with a historical review of mass media effects research and proceeds with a discussion of agenda setting, media uses and gratifications theory, and relevant sociological and psychological theory. The paper then examines current assumptions about the mass media audience, focusing on the segmentation of this audience after World War II and the resulting media fragmentation and specialization. The necessity for developing public relations strategy is discussed, with a caution that public relations practitioners should update their thinking about the mass media and concentrate their efforts more on the public and less on media members. Findings concerning the packaging of media messages and media content are presented, along with a consideration of the relevance of these findings to public relations efforts. The paper then considers the application of the new communication technologies, including cable television, satellites, and videotext, to the public relations field. The paper concludes with a brief section on the future course of public relations and the development of strategies to use the new communication technologies innovatively and effectively. (Thirty-nine footnotes are appended.) (NKA)

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A Perspective For Developing Strategies for Utilizing New Communication Technologies in Public Relations Programs

by

John A. Ledingham, Ph.D.
Professor
University of Evansville

Lynne Masel-Walters, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
University of Houston*

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Introduction

> When you're up to your armpits in alligators, it's hard to remember that your job is to drain the swamp.

While this statement lacks the polysyllabic elegance so dear to the communication scholar, it is nonetheless an accurate description of the plight of the public relations practitioner. The majority of that professional's workday is spent writing news releases, approving a newsletter layout, or wrestling with a problem of internal communication. The ultimate goals of a public relations program are often lost in the shuffle. The practitioner is simply too busy with the parts of the job to consider the sum of the efforts.

Scholars have the luxury of a wider perspective. To the scholar, the sum of an individual's job is expressed in the definition of the field. In many disciplines formulating a definition is relatively easy. However, public relations borrows heavily on the skills common to journalism, advertising, graphic design, marketing, photography, and personnel management. The theories of the field of public relations reflect the influence of disciplines such as sociology, psychology, business, and education. This multiplicity of perspectives and techniques may, in part, explain why public relations is more often defined by what it is not, than by what it is.

Public relations seems to be a field searching for an identity. One example of this vagueness is the different job titles for public relations positions. A 1983 survey of the Texas Public Relations Association (TPRA) membership revealed thirty-five different titles for the same public relations function.[1]

This lack of boundaries has not prevented scholars from trying to bind public relations to a definition. The problem is that there are nearly as many definitions as there are scholars proposing them. The element most

common to all of them, and the one most relevant for this discourse, is the recognition of public relations as a planned, purposive management function.

The Increasing Need for Research

In today's marketplace and organizational hierarchy, planning means research. Just as the wildcatter who "smells" oil in the field is being replaced by the geologist who maps ground strata, the hunch-playing publicist is being supplanted by the public relations strategist. Those individuals are trained in the ways to bring data to bear on decisions. They are aware of the need to develop strategies as well as implement programs, and are knowledgeable in the ways of measuring the effectiveness of those programs.

As the skills practitioner has drawn heavily on other fields, so is the public relations strategist beginning to use methods common to other disciplines. From marketing comes the concept of segmentation of the mass public into smaller subgroups with shared characteristics. From communication comes the realization that mass media are fragmenting into specialized communication channels. Small group interviewing techniques commonly used in advertising research help the public relations strategist learn more about audience segments. And the skills sharpened by political pollsters can be adopted to test out hypotheses in larger group settings.

The theories of other fields are also illuminating for the practice of public relations. From sociology, we can see that mass mediated messages are merely one part of an individual's social mix, and often not the most important part. From psychology comes the notion that individuals select certain messages from the barrage of media exposures. Other attitudanal and

organizational perspectives contribute toward making the public relations office an information center for a new breed of management leaders, trained in the use of verifiable facts and quantifiable data as decision-making tools.

Despite its obvious applications, research has not been embraced by the public relations profession. The TPRA survey found that less than one third of the association's membership utilize research in designing and implementing their public relations program. Those that do use it spend less than ten percent of their time with research-related activities.

Some of the reasons offered for not using research center on a lack of time to conduct research and money to pay for it. An even more popular notion is that public relations is a "people" field, unresearchable because of the whimsical nature of human behavior. In-depth interviews with practioners reveal a more basic reason. Research, with its morass of analytical techniques, is perplexing and even threatening. This is especially true for those trained in the liberal arts, with skills honed in applied efforts, rather than those with training in the hard sciences.

In spite of these fears, public relations is moving forward. The field is undergoing change as the result of internal as well as external demands. And, it is changing from a profession dominated by its practices to one characterized by its function. In terms of day-to-day operation, leadership of the field by press release writers is giving way to management by planners skilled in goal setting, strategy, implementation and evaluation.

Increasingly, public relations practitioners without these development and evaluation skills will find themselves languishing in the back shop of corporate America. While they practice their craft, others will dictate the direction the profession will go.

Our goal is to provide a perspective on public relations that helps those seeking to develop strategies for the use of new media forms in public relations programs. In doing so, we have included a review of effects theory, agenda-setting, uses and gratifications theory, and relevant sociological and pyschological theory. While some communication theory has been criticized for a lack of predictability and substantial explanation, it seems to us that a great deal of the theory reviewed works well in an applied context.

Also, included are findings concerning the packaging of media messages, message content, and the relevance of these findings to public relations efforts. Moreover, we have included brief examples of some ways emerging communication forms have already been used in public relation efforts. The intent of all this is to provide a solid perspective for the practice of public relations. Along the way, we hope we have lowered the water in the public relations swamp.

Mass Media Research

As moderr mass media emerged in the Twentieth Century, so did mass media research. Early theorists of mass media posited the disquieting view that those media had powerful effects. That theoretical position contended that media practitioners could fire messages from the guns of communication to a passive public, to direct public behavior. This came to be known as the "bullet" or "hypodermic" theory.

This simplistic view of the interaction between message originators and audiences gained favor, bolstered by such apparent verification as the response to Orson Welles' radio dramatization, War of the Worlds. However, as media research matured, it began to construct a differet view of the communication process, and the bullet theory began to crumble.

The first challenge to the bullet theory began with the Erie County (Ohio) studies during the 1940 presidential campaign. In that study, researchers interviewed voters prior to the election to find out where those voters were getting information and the importance of that information. The study revealed that information flow is seldom a one step process from communicator to communicatee. Rather, that information is processed through a nexus of friends, co-workers, and so-called "opinion leaders." The one-step theory, then, had to be modified to recognize that mass messages are subject to influence from an array of sources. And, for many people, information comes not from the media, but from others.[2]

The Erie County studies also that people with different backgrounds reacted differently to the same message at different points in the communication process. For example, education, race, family background, and a number of other factors were found to influence reaction to the mass media messages. Those reactions also varied depending on the availability of the media, and the salience of the subject matter to the audience member. Rather than any single message from any single source gaining dominance, it was found that it is the totality of information provided that helped these voters arrive at their voting decision.[3]

If media are not all powerful, what then can be said about the role of mass media and an audience? The most basic, fundamental statement is that media play a number of roles at different points to satisfy different needs.[4] Media at some points and for some people may be purely informational. Media may also be viewed as an innovation, subject to constraints of adoption. Media may be considered part of a larger milieu that serves to crystalize opinion and influence behavior. And, media may also be seen as a way of passing time entertainingly.

Recent communication research has focused on two non-competing perspectives of the communication process.

The first holds that mass media are instrumental in setting the agenda of public thought and discussion. Mass media may not be able to dictate what we think, the theory goes, but they do establish what we are going to think about. The theory has given rise to study focusing on the creation of the public agenda, particularly with regard to the practice of journalism. Those studies commonly examine the role of "gatekeepers," those who decide which topics get placed on the agenda.[5]

The second perspective views the communication process from the point of view of the audience member. This position holds that individuals themselves select the messages they want to pay attention to based on the importance of the message and its salience to that audience member. In this way, audience members are said to "use" media, just as they "use" products and services. The perspective is known as the "uses and gratifications" paradigm.[6]

A Discussion of Agenda-setting

The mass media set agenda in very straightforward ways, and for very practical reasons. Hundreds of stories are moved each day by the major news services of the world. A local news editor must decide what he thinks the readers of his newspaper (or the viewers of his television news program) will find most interesting. Because these media provide us with an agenda for discussion, we always reflect--to some degree--the tastes and preferences of that news editor. Certainly, these "gatekeepers" are a major component in determining the slate of public discussion and the issues that are uppermost in the collective mind of the public.

Media also set the agenda in ways that are less direct. Political candidates welcome news coverage because the news media seem to provide a legitimacy to their campaigns (witness Jimmy Carter's rise in the mid-1970s from a former governor to a national figure). Mass media discussion of major issues (herpes, AIDS, child disappearances) helps to move those items to top-of-mind public awareness. Even when other factors bring the issues and items to the national spotlight, media play a pivotal role in the ways in which these issues are interpreted.

The agenda-setting function of mass media is most obvious among those who have yet to form an opinion on an issue or candidate, service or product. And, even in our information-overloaded society, there are those persons who are uniformed and others that are undecided. Consider attitudes toward Afgnanistan before the Russian invasion, the insanity plea prior to John Hinckley's acquittal, or product safety before the Tylenol scare. To some, issues may not seem pertinent. Others simply pay scant attention to issues or candidates until late in a campaign. As interest among these individuals grows, however, the gates of media selectivity swing open. And, because of the natural subjectivity involved in the production, processing, and dissemination of information, these individuals are recipients of someone else's agenda.

A Discussion of Uses and Gratifications

Uses and gratifications theory posits that those in the interaction between message originator and audience member choose to be a member of that audience by selecting that message to attend to. This intrapersonal perspective on the communication process is not at odds with the interpersonal position of agenda-setting. Uses and gratifications theory would simply hold that

the individual selects messages from that agenda, depending on their relative importance, for their reinforcement value, and as a way to resolve simultaneous and conflicting viewpoints.

This selection of communication messages depends on four factors--habit, availability, consistency, and utility.[7] The first two have been the subject of a great deal of applied research, although academic researchers have not found them popular topics for inquiry. Areas covered include audience analysis, media diet, and media use. Key terms include "network, circulation, readership, reach, frequency," and, with cable television, "penetration."

The contention that individuals select communication messages, just as they select products and services, has led to media being examined within a framework known as "adoption theory." This holds that media are perceived to have attributes, as are products, and that these attributes are differentially attractive.[8]

Consistency and utility have been the subject of a great deal of scholarly inquiry. Consistency theory is built on the notion that people select communication messages that are consonant with pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. In this view, individuals use communication messages to avoid "cognitive dissonance," a state in which two or more conflicting views are held at the same time. To prevent such a condition, individuals seek messages that reinforce their existing views. And, they avoid messages that conflict with that position. This is said to occur through "selective attention."[9]

"Selective perception" comes into play after an individual has opted to select a certain message from the hundreds of media messages to which we are exposed each week. This process dictates how that message will be perceived. Selective perception contends that individuals see what they expect to see. These "information cues," as they are called, support existing

attitudes. Dissonant messages are played down, rejected, or reinterpreted.[10] The process continues with "selective retention;" the tendency to remember only consonant messages, or those that support existing attitudes.

Moreover, this "strain toward consistency" is itself inconsistent. It varies from individual to individual and issue to issue. That variance depends on the degree of committment one feels. Unimportant issues are not as likely to make one uncomfortable about holding momentary conflicting attitudes. On the other hand, dissonant information about issues to which we feel a committment are avoided, as are those that are critical of people we like. Selectivity also varies with the amount of controversy associated with the issue and the degree of confidence one holds in one's own position. Because confusion cannot be tolerated, selectivity leads one, generally, to seek reinforcing messages.[12]

Thus, we see that the effects of media are subtle rather than all powerful. And, media can be a force in setting the agenda of public discussion. Moreover, audience members act as media consumers, picking media messages to gratify certain needs. And, media messages are generally processed through a network of trusted sources prior to the making of important decisions.

The next areas of review are the segmentation of mass audiences, and the fragmentation of mass media.

Mass Audience Segmentation-Mass Media Fragmentation

World War II exploded with a force that changed the face of America and the world. Women left the home to work alongside men in the factories. When the war ended, many of these women decided not to return to their role as a housewife. Change in the family structure resulted. Family discretionery income increased, creating a revolution of expectations, and sweeping life-

style changes. In addition, Blacks, Hispanics and other minorities demanded recognition, along with Gays, Grays, and born-again Christians. Each group carried with it its own unique traits, preferences, ways of viewing the world, and its special lifestyle.

As the mass audience segmented, the mass media fragmented and specialized. Now media caused old media to change. Radio proved it could win the race to announce news first, causing newspapers to reassess and reposition as a medium that provides news "in-depth." Moreover, newspapers also began to specialize in terms of content and locale. Financial newspapers emerged. Neighborhood newspapers developed and grew. "Newspapers" filled completely with advertisements became common.

In a similar way, television forced radio to change its focus. The once widespread networks of early radio were replaced by local stations, with specialized formats designed to appeal to the changing preferences of local audiences. For example, until recently radio station KBTL in Houston, Texas, only played music by the Beatles in an attempt to appeal to the 1960s generation, the baby boomers that are now in control of a sizable percentage of the spendable income of the country.

Magazines changed in response to television. Mass circulation magazines were replaced by specialized publications. The trend continues toward highly refined content and strictly defined audiences. Ms. paves the way for Working Woman, which in turn is followed by Working Mother.

Today, cable television is causing over-the-air television to reassess its position. New cable systems in scores of communities offer multi-channel selectivity to their subscribers. Advertisers are already turning to these

"narrowcasting" opportunities to reach select audiences. Eventually, television rating services may find it beneficial to change from rating audiences by size to measuring audience composition.

In each case, media specialized, narrowing their audience focus, and emerged as channels for sending specifically tailored messages to select audience segments. These audience segments are defined in terms of their shared characteristics, including their predisposition to an issue, candidate, product, or service.

Developing Public Relations Strategy

Given the segmentation of the mass audience and the divergence of interests among those segments, it is obvious that it is futile to try to please all segments. Public relations practitioners can, however, try to mobilize behavior among those already predisposed to act in a certain way (remember, one of the main "effects" of mass media is to reinforce existing attitudes). To do so, however, public relations practitioners must change their point of view. To a great degree, public relations practitioners act as though the bullet theory is still the dominant explanation of the interaction of communicators and communicatees. And, they tend to concentrate their work efforts on members of the media, rather than members of the public.

The TPRA survey found that a majority of the respondents spend more than fifteen percent (16.2%) of their time on media relations. More than ten percent (11.3%) of their time is spent writing press releases. Combined, those two endeavors constitute the major activity of these professionals. In fact, they spend more time in generating publicity than in any other activity.

Perhaps because of that, it is common for public relations practitioners to measure the success of their programs not in terms of the audience they

ultimately want to affect, but in terms of their impact on journalists! Success is explained in terms of news coverage, rather than in attitude or behavioral change.

This is not to discount the value of publicity, but it is seldom the entire strategy. A strategy is simply a way of achieving a goal. It is not the goal itself. Thus, the placing of news of a certain item in certain media is not a goal, but a part of a strategy for increasing awareness, affecting an attitude, reinforcing a predisposition, or directing a behavior. The goals of a public relations program must be carefully developed, based on information about relevant publics as the groundwork. That information includes a knowledge of the media diet, attitudes, and past behavior of that public segment. Once the goals are established, strategy can be formulated and implemented. At that point, other factors come into play, including message packaging and content.

Message Packaging and Content

Messages may be thought of as similar to other "products." They can be packaged and that packaging can make a difference in response. Direct mail practitioners, for example, find that envelopes contructed from color paper stock generate more return order requests than white envelopes. They also have found that additional color on that envelope aids response, as do graphics on the envelope. Moreover, a "handwritten" message asking the reader to open the envelope for a reward inside works to increase response rates. Personalizing the address, rather than merely sending the letter to an "occupant" is also an effective means of increasing response.[13]

Similarly, advertising researchers have found that color can produce up to fifteen percent greater response than an ad without color. And, white

space can also affect response to the ad. Moreover, it has been found that fourfifths of those who read a print advertisement do not read past the headline and the key llustration. If the message is not included in those components, then eightly percent of those who read the ad will be likely to miss your message.[14]

Advertising researchers have also learned that the most effective advertising messages are those which clearly identify the target audience in the headline (such as "Mothers of Cavity-prone Children"), and make a specific promise ("Take Aim Against Tooth Decay"). The most effective advertising visuals show the target audience actively engaged in the realization of the promise (a picture of a child brushing his teeth, for this example). And, the origin of that promise is crucial. It comes from the "key consumer benefit," or the product feature which the consumer perceives as the most important.[14] In other words, the content of the advertising message is dictated by the needs and perceptions of the consumer segment to whom the product is "targeted." Good design and headline writing are effective, but only when the ad is properly targeted.

Persuasive Content

Persuasion has been the subject of hundreds of journal articles. Other scholars have distilled a few overriding suggestions and observations from that work. The ones most relevant are listed below:

1. Communication is most effective when it is directed to segments of the mass population, based on shared characteristics, in specially tailored messages, through specialized communication channels;

2. Mass media are but one information source. For the most part, the effects of mass media are to set the agenda in the absence of predispositions, or to reinforce the predispositions when they are already in place;

3. Most mass media messages are screened by potential readers and viewers. Those that are of interest (familar, important, etc.) are attended to, and others are not;

4. When mass media are used as information sources, personal networks are used as checks on that information prior to entering the information evaluation stage of the communication process;

5. The so-called "mass media" are, in fact, comprised of specialized media. Newspapers are geographically fragmented. Radio is comprised of local formats. Magazines are specialized by topic content. Television is on the verge of such fragmentation with the widespread adoption of cable television;

6. The most effective use of media for public relations purposes is as a carrier of specially designed messages for narrow audience segments already disposed to the goals of the public relations effort;

7. Proper packaging of a message can positively affect the attention given to that message; and,

8. Persuasive techniques can be applied to message content of public relations efforts, although such techniques are of questionable value unless proper strategy, targeting, and implementation are in place.

And, from all of the above, we offer a definition of public relations as the directing of specially tailored messages to specific audiences to mobilize pre-existing attitudes and predispositions into desired behavior with measurable results.

New Communication Technologies

New communication forms are emerging that are particularly suited to narrowcast specially tailored messages to special audience segments. They include cable television, satellites, and videotex--which results from the merger of traditional print and broadcast media with computer technology.

Cable Television

Cable television emerged in the late 1940s as a means of importing over-the-air television signals to rural and/or mountainous areas. A community antenna was erected atop a local mountain or building to intercept television signals from distant cities. That signal was then reinforced and sent on the homes of those willing to subscribe to the service.[16]

During the 1950s, the character of community antenna television (CATV) continued. However, in the decade of the 1960s, the small "mom and pop" cable systems began to be bought by "a new generation of entrepreneurs."[17] The new owners looked to the major metropolitan areas, rich in potential subscribers, and began to formulate strategies to penetrate those major markets. One of the stratagies was to build prototype systems that would be state-of-the-art, complete with "addressable-service," and "pay per view." Out of this stategy came first QUBE--Warner/Amex's state-of-the-art system. That was followed by

INDAZ, the market offering of Cox Cable Communications. Both offer "tiered service," in which subscribers may elect to pay fees in addition to the usual recurring monthly charge for extra channels such as HBO, or Showtime. Both have experimented extensively with videotex.

By 1982, the cable industry had grown from a handful of subscribers in rural areas to some 30 percent of all U.S. homes, through more than 4,400 cable television systems. Subscribers were coming on to the cable through those systems at the rate of 8,000 a day.[18] Those systems offer not only the usual network programming fare, but also a multiplicity of channels. In many of these systems, channel time can be purchased by the half hour, rather than in the thirty and sixty second chunks that are common in buying network. And, each channel can be looked at as an opportunity for narrowcasting to select audiences. With dozens of channels available, the traditional problem of channel scarcity associated with the networks is eliminated. Advertising agencies have been cautious about commiting to a cable as part of their media mix budget, but the cable audience--described as "favorable to advertising"--is developing.[19]

This relatively inexpensive medium, ideally suited for narrowcasting, has given rise to a new advertising format including the "informmercial." Two forms of an informmercial have emerged. In the first, an advertiser buys sixty seconds of time (rather than the now standard thirty seconds). The first fifteen seconds serve as an introduction, followed by the more or less traditional thirty-second spot, followed in turn by another fifteen seconds of "exit" material. For example a gasoline company might ask: "Do know that there are 10 things you can check that will usually tell you why your car is stalled in tarffic? We'll be back in a moment to tell you what they are." Following this narrative hook, a thirty-second spot for the gasoline company

is run. At its completion, the "informmercial" continues with a listing of the 10 items that are associated with a stalled automobile. That form of an "informmercial" grows out of research that finds that interest in programming content, as might be expected, carries over to interest in commercials inserted in that programming. So, the advertiser, in effect, is creating his own "show"--the car trouble show--and inserting his own commercial in it.[20]

The second form of an informmercial fits into the following scenario. An advertiser purchases as much time as is needed to tell a story on a local cable system (whether that is nine minutes or twenty-nine). Ads are then placed in other local media announcing that the program will be run. If, for example, the informmercial concerns home computers, the ads might talk about the wonders of the home computer for income tax computation, and invite viewers to turn to "channel 39" at three or four different times of the week. The informmercial then presents uses of the home computer, followed by an explanation that the demonstration has used a certain brand. The announcer then notes that anyone wanting more information (a home demonstration, or whatever) need only call a local number (or a toll-free one) and information will be forwarded (or an appointment made, or whatever). In cable systems with a response key pad, the viewer need only touch a designated number on the pad. Microprocessors assigned to each two hundred homes in such systems "read" the response and relay the information back to a main computer at the cable system's head-end (central headquarters). Then, information can be forwarded by address.

Obviously, public relations practitioners could utilize a combination of purchased and free media to promote similar programs. In fact, there are even ways to gain completely free time on major city cable stations.

The free time is available through a practice called "access." Through access, cable time is provided free on an open "access channel" to representatives of local government, local educational institutions, and the public at large on a first-come, first-served basis. The access opportunity grows out of rules and regulations promulagated by the Federal Communications Commission (F.C.C.) in 1972, amended in 1975, and finally tossed out by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1980. Nonetheless, access provisions remain in the franchise agreements hammered out between cable systems and the municipality in which they operate in many of the larger communities in the U.S. Where stipulations in the franchise agreement require it, local cable system operators may even provide basic video production equipment free for those seeking to promote a local organization or cause. And, even though the F.C.C. access rules were overturned three years ago, some cable systems still promise access as a means of offering a competitive advantage over other cable systems competing for the same franchise. More than $300,000 is being spent on access in Houston, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana, will have multiple access centers in the near future.[21]

Some practitioners have already found cable to be useful in their campaign efforts. As early as 1970, cable was being used in some small rural communities to promote local issues. In Chillicothe, Ohio, in 1970, the local cable system (TelComm) was a critical part of a communication campaign conducted in order to gain voter approval for a bond issue to construct a new hospital for the region. A series of call-in programs worked extremely well in setting the agenda for discussion of that issue. The program was promoted through paid media, and the cable time was provided free by the cable system. The issue was approved overwhelmingly, while many similar issues on that ballot were defeated.[22]

In a larger arena, cable--combined with traditional television--has already met the test of a presidential campaign. Seeking funding for the campaign, those in charge of one candidate's campaign turned to cable and non-network television. They purchased time on eight cable systems and seven independent television stations. Supporters were then invited to neighborhood cocktail parties. At a prearranged time, television sets were turned on in those homes where the parties were being hosted and the candidate made his plea for $1,000 campaign contributions. It was highly successful. The total cost of the fund-raising effort, was $140,000, or the same amount needed to purchase thirty seconds of network time on M*A*S*H*.[23] Obviously, the technique could be expanded to other fund-raising efforts.

The examples illustrate creative applications of new technologies to traditional public relations activities. Moreover, those techniques need not be limited to fundraising or the electoral process. Satellites can tie together cable systems, creating new networks and new public relations opportunities. It is yet another way to reach special audiences with tailored messages.

And, those cable audiences share characteristics markedly different from traditional network television audiences. Cable television subscribers, for example, watch more television than non-subscribers.[24] In fact, the aggregate audience of cable television matches that of the third-ranked network with a 19 percent share of the homes using television.[25] Subscribers who watch the automated news services (like a "crawl" of wire copy) do so at the expense of radio news listening.[26] Repeated showing of a cable program <u>increases</u> audience size, whereas repeated showing of a network program (the "re-runs") <u>decreases</u> audience size. In fact, cable picks up the slack when the summer re-runs begin on network television.[27] We also know something about the make-

up of these cable audiences; they reside more often in single family dwellings and are more likely to have children at home.[28]

Satellites

In 1962, AT&T and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) launched Telstar.[29] That satellite was followed by Early Bird, a "synchronous" satellite that can bounce messages between two earth points. These satellites, and those that followed, changed the earth from a planet of isolated communities into a global village. With the satellite transmission of the Ali-Frazier heavyweight championship boxing match in 1975, the commercial worth of the satellite system was proven.[30]

Today, satellites link systems of cable television, over-the-air broadcast stations, subscription television and more. In San Francisco, California, clergy of the Catholic Church have used satellites to allow priests to talk "face-to-face" across the continent.[31] Satellite is the system used to link a number of religious programming networks.

Increasingly, satellites are seen as a means of importing distant signals to rural parts of the globe, much as early cable television was used to import the signals from big-city television stations to rural America. These satellites represent a tremendous opportunity for those in public relations. Their use is limited only by the creativeness of those who would use them.

Videotex

Videotex began as a technique for permitting the hard of hearing to enjoy television by placing a textual caption at the bottom of the transmitted picture.[32] Prior to that innovation, cable subscribers had installed electronic systems to track subscribers' use of the channels as a means of billing for special pay-per-view programs. To assist in billing, every two hundred

homes was assigned to a microprocessor that kept a record of viewing of pay channels and programs. That microprocessor fed its collected data to a central computer located at the cable system's headquarters (or "head-end"). Somewhere along the way, someone realized that linking the home television to a central computer had, in effect, turned that home set into a video display terminal. With that realization came the new services that we lump together under the generic label "videotex."

There are three levels of videotex service. The first is teletext. In this system, textual "pages" are transmitted over the air in a fast, unbroken cycle. Viewers with a specially equipped television set grab a page as it cycles by. In this way, data such as news stories, personal records, library material and the like can be stored in a central computer and be made available on a home television set.[33]

The next higher level of service is viewdata. It is characterized by data transmitted over telephone lines. With this type of system, users can "interact" with the central computer, not only looking at their own bank records but also changing funds from one account to another. In this way, a home television set can be used to conduct any number of electronic transactions from bill paying to video browsing.[34]

At the top of the videotex ladder is videotext (note the additional "t"). A videotext system uses cable to deliver the data, making the system more flexible and fully interative, and allowing for more use of more services at a single time.[35]

Various experiments are already underway. In Columbus, Ohio, Warner/Amex pioneered QUBE. While QUBE's potential has yet to be realized, Warner/Amex has

demonstrated the marketplace viability of the product. Cox Cable Company's INDAX, though limited geographically, is more state-of-the-art. However, service is still available on a pilot basis only.[36]

In fact, there are some forty-eight videotex projects underway in twenty-two countries. Approximately $500 million has already been spent or committed to this technology by industry, investors and governments. Some 2,300 electronic publishers (called "information providers" in the industry) are offering a total of more than two million videotex screens in public projects, with an additional two thousand videotex terminals estimated to be in use in private systems.[37]

Research already tells us a good deal about the users of these systems. The most likely users are married, have a two-income household, use automated teller machines for banking and telephone banking services, generally have experience using a computer, and want videotex service for the convenience and time-saving features, as well as to monitor local events and check local theatres and restaurants.[38] At this point, the content of the services is less important than the degree of comfort the user feels for computer technology. There is little opposition to the concept of sponsored messages (advertising) on emerging videotext systems.[39]

An aspect of videotex that public relations practitioners should find particularly interesting is that videotex is primarily an <u>information systems</u>. It is difficult to imagine a viewer "browsing" through the myriad branching strategies of one of the videotext systems. They serve their user's interest best when that user is seeking specific information on a special subject, be that topic a news story, a product, or a service. It would seem that the informational nature of such a system, coupled with the assumption that one is seeking information, makes the medium of videotex an especially

appropriate medium for those seeking to reinforce views or set an agenda. That is because those seeking information are most susceptible to having the agenda set by someone else. And, those seeking further information about a product or service must already have some knowledge. or they would not be seeking more information. In either case, the screens of a videotex system offer an opportunity to influence attitudes, and to mobilize predispositions.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Given all that has been discussed, it becomes obvious that strategies involving mass media messages--and they are but one part of all the activities that might be undertaken as a part of a public relations program--must rest on a thorough understanding of the background, attitudes, interests, and life-style of those to whom the messages will ultimately be directed. It is equally obvious, given the limited effects of mass media, that public relations strategists must target their messages in the same way that advertisers target messages--to identified, and narrowly defined population segments. It is further apparent that the most effective means of reaching potential "constituencies," or "significant publics" is through media that they watch or read. It stands to reason that such an approach would also be the most cost effective.

The new communication technologies offer an opportunity to utilize their "splintercasting" capabilities to reach these specialized audience segments, as do specialized media of all types. The specific ways of using them has, thus far, barely been tapped. As the new media forms emerge, reshape, and re-emerge, their potential can only grow. Finding innovative ways in which to use these new forms to achieve traditional public relations goals is one of the major challenges facing the field of public relations today. Meeting that

challenge represents a goal. It is incumbent upon those in the everyday practice of public relations to utilize what has already been learned to develop strategies to meet that goal.

NOTES

[1]A summary of the results of the survey is available upon request from the authors.

[2]Lazarfeld, Paul F., Bernard Barelson and Hazel Gaudet. 1944. The People's Choice. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pierce.

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[4]Martin, John L. 1976. Recent Theory on Mass Media Potential in Political Campaigns." The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. 427: 125-133.

[5]Westley, Bruce, and Malcolm MacLean, Jr. 1957. "A Conceptual Model for Communications Research." Journalism Quarterly 34: 31-38.

[6]Barelson, Bernard. "What Missing the Newspaper Means," in Wilburn Schramm (ed.), The Process and Effects of Human Communication. 36-47.

[7]Lazarfeld, Paul F., and Herbert Menzel. 1963. "Mass Media and Personal Influence," Wilber Schramm (ed.), The Science of Human Communication. New York: Basic Books.

[8]Everett M. Rogers and F. Floyd Shoemaker. 1971. Communication of Innovations: A Cross Cultural Approach. New York: The Free Press.

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[10]Brock, T.C., and J.L. Ballona. 1967. "Behavioral Receptivity to Dissonant Information." Journal of Personality & Social Psychology. 6: 413-428.

[11]Lazarfeld, Barelson, and Gaudet. 1944.

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[13]Stone, Bob. 1979. Successful Direct Marketing Methods. Chicago, Illinois: Crain.

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[15]Ulloth, Dana R., Peter Klinge and Sandra Eells. 1983. Mass Media: Past, Present, Future. New York: West Publishing. p. 380.

[16]Phillips, Mary Alice Mayer. 1972. CATV: A History of Community Antenna Television. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. p. 7.

[17]"Cable Television: Pay Now, Fly Later." Barron's. November 8, 1976. p. 3.

[18]Broadcasting. January 4, 1982. p. 82.

[19]"Fragmented cable can't attract ads." USA Today. October 21, 1983. p. 1B.

[20]The so-called "informmercial" was the subject of a good deal of discussion at the August, 1983, Advertising Age Creative Seminar held in New York City. In particular, advertising practitioners are concerned about channel switching on cable systems and a need to create "programming" that "involves" the video audience. The informmercial is seen as a possible step toward the solution of those problems.

[21]The funds in Houston, Texas, will be made available as part of the $1,200,000 that Warner/Amex Communications Inc., will ultimately pay to the city for local access programming.

Plans for multiple access centers are part of the proposal submitted by Cox Cable for the New Orleans, Louisiana franchise and accepted by the city.

[22]Dr. Ledingham was the liaison between the community leaders and Conrad & Associates, Columbus, Ohio, the advertising agency for the campaign.

[23]The story is common in the political fundraising professional community.

[24]Cosner, Dwight M. 1980. "The Changing Audience of the '80s." Paper presented to the BEA Faculty/NAB Industry Programming Seminar, Washington, D.C.

[25]"Neilsen Rates Cable TV." Advertising Age. September 24, 1979. p. 100.

[26]Kaplan, Stuart J. 1978. "The Impact of Cable Television Services on the Use of Competing Media." Journal of Broadcasting. 22: 155-165.

[27]Sparker, Vernone. 1978. "Television Viewers' Response to Repeat Program Scheduling." Journalism Quarterly. 5: 779-781.

[28]Becker, Lee, and Sheizaf Fafaeli. 1981. "Cable Impact on Media Use: A Preliminary Report from Columbus." Paper presented to the Theory and Methodology Division, Association for Education in Journalism.

[29]Gross, Lynne Schaefer. 1983. The New Television Technologies. Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown. p. 48.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Those interested in the approach should contact Father Michael Reiss, Catholic Diocese San Francisco, California.

[32]Tyler, Michael. 1979. "Electronic Publishing: A Sketch of the European Experience." Paper presented at the Workshop on Emerging Issues. Menlo, Park, California.

[33]Real, Michael. 1981. Videotex and Education: A Review of British Developments. Study published through the Center for Communications. San Diego State University: San Diego, California.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Butler, Cox & Partners 1981. The Future of Videotex. Butler, Cox & Partners, Unlimited: London, England. p. 2.

[36]Cox's problems are illustrated in the eighteen-month-long wait for an acceptable keypad for its system, INDAX, in the San Diego, California system. However, INDAX is still a potential videotex system while QUBE is increasingly available in most of Warner's franchise areas.

[37]Butler, Cox & Partners, p. 2.

[38]Ledingham, John, and David M. Dozier. 1981. "What Cable Television Subscribers Think About Two-way Interactive Television Services." Paper presented at the Regional Conference of the Mass Communication Division of the Association for Education in Journalism. Atlanta, Georgia.

[39]"Video Topic Preferences: Report on Module II." 1982. The Center for Communications. San Diego State University: San Diego, California.